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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001121

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDIS CONDEMN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, RALLY BEHIND PRINCE

REF: A. RIYADH 1110

[1](#)B. RIYADH 939

[1](#)C. RIYADH 921

[1](#)D. RIYADH 928

Classified By: CDA Ambassador Richard Erdman for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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[1](#)1. (C) In the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt targeting Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Naif (MbN) (ref A), King Abdullah and other officials responded swiftly and decisively to reassure the public that the Prince was well, and reaffirm the Kingdom's commitment to combating terrorism. The press and the public universally condemned the attack, characterizing it as a direct assault against the Saudi state and Islam. A more measured reaction in the blogosphere hints at how this most recent incident might affect domestic debate on the proper approach to dealing with domestic terrorism, with some calling for continued leniency and emphasis on reform and others arguing the Saudi government is being too lax. The attack seems to have strengthened the already positive public reputation of Prince Mohammed bin Naif, and many religious-minded Saudis will see his miraculous survival, almost unscathed, as a sign of Divine protection and blessing for his efforts against Al-Qaeda and other extremists. For his part, Prince Mohammed has told us the attack has only strengthened his resolve, and convinced him that the Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy, combining firmness with understanding, is effective and should continue. End Summary and Comment.

OFFICIAL REACTION SWIFT AND DECISIVE

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[1](#)2. (U) Official condemnation came from all quarters immediately following the attack. The Saudi Press Agency published photographs of King Abdullah and MbN, wearing a bandage on his left middle finger, meeting at the hospital in Jeddah. News channel Al-Arabiya played a tape of the visit throughout the day in which the visibly concerned King praised Allah for the Prince's safety and described the attack as an attack against both Islam and the country: "Thanks be to God that you are safe and nothing has happened to you. Everything you might have suffered in the service of your religion and homeland will not be for nothing, God willing." MbN responded that this attack "would only strengthen our resolve to root out the terrorists," and admitted that he was at fault for failing to require a full search of the bomber. Official reports note that the would-be assassin was on a list of 85 wanted terrorists, that MbN was aware of his planned attendance, and that he had been expected to turn himself in at the event.

[1](#)3. (U) Other prominent religious and political figures were widely quoted in the press the day after the incident. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia told Okaz newspaper the attack was "not unexpected," and called the assailant "deviant" and

"corrupt to the core." Justice Minister Mohammed Al-Issa "thanked Allah" for keeping the Prince safe. Interior Ministry Spokesman Major General Mansour Al-Turki reaffirmed the Ministry's commitment to fighting terrorism, characterizing the attack as "an isolated incident" and adding "those who think the war on terror is over in the Kingdom are mistaken."

#### PRINCE FETED IN PAPERS, PUBLIC SHOCKED BY ATTACK

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14. (U) All major Arabic and English dailies led with the story, focusing prominently on MbN himself and his role in the Kingdom's war on terror. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat dedicated the first three pages of the August 29 edition solely to the attack on the Prince and related subjects. Other papers included lengthy biographical profiles of the Prince, editorial cartoons dealing with the event, and even poems in his honor.

15. (U) The articles and editorials show broad support for MbN and, more generally, the fight against terrorism. Many depicted the event as an assault on the Saudi state that called for a patriotic response. Saudi journalist Dawood Al-Shiryan wrote in Al-Hayat that the attack was "terrorism as a political rebellion attempting to undermine the authority of the state." Okaz called the attack "an attack on the security of the nation...that should make everyone alert and ready to fight." The August 29 editorial cartoon in Al-Watan depicted a prone terrorist, wearing an explosive belt and holding a detonator in each hand, dead and bleeding

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from a wound caused by the Saudi flag planted in his back. In the same paper, a caricature accompanying a poem celebrating the Prince as "Engineer of Love and War" shows him carrying a shield resembling the Saudi flag.

16. (U) The public's reaction as portrayed in an Arab News article was of "shock, disgust, and dismay," noting that the timing of the attack during the holy month of Ramadan was a particular source of ire. One student in Jeddah said "Yes, there is frustration among a section of people regarding our foreign policy, but what happened...is deplorable and utterly un-Islamic." A Riyadh-based professional questioned whether the Kingdom should continue with its rehabilitation programs, saying these efforts had been "nullified" by the attack and that the perpetrator had "betrayed our leaders." Others called the attack "evidence that the government's anti-terror tactics have been largely successful," and observed "panic in the terror camp" and "frustration with the government's continued success of hitting (terrorists) hard."

#### DIVERSE REACTION IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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17. (U) On his Saudi Jeans blog, Ahmed Al-Omran expressed relief that the Prince was not seriously injured and hope that the incident would not "add fuel to the fire" of the debate between liberals and conservatives. He added, "this is a time for solidarity and national unity, let us not ruin it." A contributor to blog Al-Saha encouraged MbN to continue to demonstrate openness and patience with terrorists, not revert to iron-fisted policies. An informal poll on the same website indicated strong support for the Prince, with 58% of voters suggesting MbN should replace his father as Interior Minister. Liberal blog Al-Tomaar said the attack was the result of "spoiling terrorists and treating them leniently," referring to the SAG's widely-touted terrorist rehabilitation scheme (ref B).

#### CONTACTS RESERVE COMMENT

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¶8. (C) Post contacts were reluctant to comment substantively on the attack over the phone, telling us that it was common for royals to welcome well-wishers during Ramadan, that they were relieved MbN was not injured, and that they wondered why the man was not checked. When the subject was broached at a meeting between PAS officers and Deputy Minister of Higher Education Mohammed Alohalí on August 29, however, he went somewhat beyond the fulsome praise of MbN as "Qahir al Erhaby" (conqueror of terrorism) that is the stuff of most media commentary. "We know what we're up against," said Alohalí, adding that dangerous extremists were still a threat to the country. This, he said, was the reason the SAG was pushing educational reform so hard.

TERROR, YEMEN ALREADY HOT TOPICS  
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¶9. (U) Saudi soul-searching about the root causes and extent of domestic terrorism has been evident since 2003, and the August 20 announcement that 44 suspected Al-Qaeda militants had been arrested in the Kingdom injected it with new vigor. On August 22, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat columnist Husayn Al-Shubakshi praised the Saudi security forces for their "pre-emptive, focused, professional, and secret blows," and credited MbN directly for the Ministry's success.

¶10. (U) In an August 27 piece in the same paper, columnist Mshari Al-Zaydi also considered the arrests a success, while citing the need to confront terrorism as an ideological issue. That this new batch of terrorists was predominantly Saudi, middle-aged, and well-educated challenged previous assumptions that economic deprivation and youthful religious zealotry were responsible for domestic terrorism, and indicated that the government needed to rethink its approach. "Saudi Arabia is now confronting a new virus that is constantly evolving," he writes, adding "the ideological doctor who is holding on to the surgeon's scalpel...is yet to enter the operating theater."

¶11. (C) Although unvoiced in the gushing media paeans to MbN, ordinary Saudis are wondering how this assassination attempt came so close to fruition. According to today's edition of "Okaz," the suspect managed to make his way from Yemen into Saudi Arabia some weeks ago, and finally rented a furnished apartment in Jeddah. We anticipate that such reports will inevitably spur some introspection into how well the security services are patrolling the Asir region.

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